

Freedom of the Press

Gabon's constitution guarantees both freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but these rights are restricted in practice. In 2013 the government-controlled media regulatory body continued its practice of suspending newspapers for articles critical of the president and government ministers, and for generalized infractions like indecency and vulgarity.

The 2001 media law currently in effect does not meet international standards for freedom of expression, and does not have any provisions for online media, including social media and blogs. The law recognizes the protection of journalistic sources except "in cases specified by the law" but the Legal Code does not specify which cases are relevant. The government of President Ali Bongo Ondimba has publicly expressed its desire to revise its media law. In addition in 2013, Reporters without Borders called for the 2001 law to be scrapped and replaced by an entirely new law.

Libel can be treated as a criminal offense, and the government is permitted to criminalize civil suits and initiate criminal cases in response to the alleged libel of public officials. In February 2013, Dimitri Louba, editor of the weekly *La Loupe*, the prosecutor requested a sentence of 15 days in prison and a fine of more than \$10,000 for defamation of the director general of budget, Yves Fernand Manfoumbi. In March, Louba was sentenced to five months in prison, with reprieve, and was also ordered to pay more than \$1,000 in damages and interest. In March 2013, an environmental activist, Marc Ona Essangui, was handed a six-month suspended sentence for defamation. During a November 2012 television debate, Ona had accused Bongo's chief of staff, Liban Souleymane, of having a controlling interest in Olam Gabon, a subsidiary of the Singaporean commodities firm Olam International, which has a joint venture agreement with Gabon believed to be worth more than \$200 million. The contract is not public.

There is no freedom of information law. Government agencies publish only the minimum amount of information required. A culture of secrecy exists within government bureaucracies suspicious of anyone seeking information, and there are many hurdles to accessing that information.

Gabon's media regulatory body, the National Communications Council (CNC), is made up of nine members appointed by Bongo and the presidents of the two chambers of parliament, who are members of Bongo's Gabonese Democratic Party. While independent in theory, the CNC is subject to political interference by the ruling party and the minister of communications, to which it reports. Publications can be suspended for libel and other offenses. In 2013, the CNC issued two six-month suspensions—one to the privately owned weekly *Ezombolo* due to an April 22 column that criticized Bongo's record in office, and the second to the satirical supplement of *La Griffe* newspaper, *Le Gri-Gri de la Griffe*, for "indulging in indecency and vulgarity in most of its publications," according to news reports. The CNC also suspended *La Calotte* newspaper for two months over articles critical of a minister and a deputy minister.

Media outlets occasionally voiced criticism of the government and ruling party, but journalists continued to practice self-censorship, especially when it came to the president. Physical attacks and harassment directed at journalists occur occasionally. The editor of the monthly *Gabon d'Abord* alleged that he was beaten in a political party official's office in February 2013. In June, strangers burned down the car of journalist Maximin Mezui, editorial director for independent publication *La UNE*; it was speculated the incident was politically motivated.

There are two daily newspapers: *L'Union*, a former government-owned daily that has been privately held since 2000, but is still closely affiliated with the ruling party, and the government-owned *Gabon Matin*. There are about two dozen private weeklies and monthlies, all based in the capital, Libreville, but they publish sporadically due to financial constraints, a lack of advertising, and government-ordered suspensions. Their ownership is opaque, although most lean strongly toward the PDG or an opposition party. There are several dozen private radio stations and about two dozen television stations throughout the country. The government also owns two television stations, RTG1 and RTG2, and three radio stations, including part ownership in Africa No. 1—the most powerful Francophone radio station in Africa (which has been based in Libreville, Gabon's capital, since its founding in 1981). Foreign publications are readily available. Satellite television is also available to those who can afford it, and foreign radio broadcasts are widely accessible.

Nine percent of the population accessed the internet in 2013. There were no reports of internet censorship, but until 2011, access to the sole fiber-optic submarine cable was monopolized by Gabon Telecom, and broadband internet penetration was limited by high costs and lack of availability outside the capital. The arrival of a second cable in 2012, part of the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) fiber optic project, improved the prospects for more competitive pricing, more connectivity, faster speeds, and increased internet use.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

70

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

24

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

24

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

22